



Commonwealth of Virginia

Office of Governor Terry McAuliffe

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Office of the Governor

Contact: Brian Coy

Email: Brian.Coy@governor.virginia.gov

Office of the Attorney General

Contact: Michael Kelly

Email: MKelly@oag.state.va.us

Department of General Services

Contact: Dena Potter

Phone: 804-786-0282

Email: Dena.Potter@dgs.virginia.gov

Governor McAuliffe Dedicates Renovated Capitol Square Building in Honor of Civil Rights Pioneer Barbara Johns

RICHMOND – Governor Terry McAuliffe today dedicated a newly renovated state office building in honor of Barbara Johns, who as a teen in 1951 led a group of students to walk out of their Farmville high school in protest of the dilapidated conditions, paving the way for a lawsuit that led to the desegregation of the nation's public schools.

“Barbara Johns didn’t simply lead her classmates in a protest of inequitable schools. She led a group of young people and an entire nation to realize that courage was blind to age and race, and that real change requires action,” **said Governor McAuliffe**. “The walkout she led kicked off an extraordinary chain of events that eventually invalidated the deception of ‘separate but equal.’”

Having her name placed among the other giants in Virginia and American history who are celebrated on Capitol Square is a fitting tribute to her legacy.”

“Working in the Barbara Johns Building will be a daily reminder to me, my team, and all those who pass through our doors that we must commit ourselves every single day to the pursuit of justice. Barbara Johns showed our Commonwealth and our country that progress is not always easy or inevitable. It requires courage and leadership, often from a young person who can still see injustice with clear eyes,” **said Attorney General Mark Herring**, who joined McAuliffe at the dedication and whose offices are housed in the building.

“Words cannot adequately express how excited and appreciative we, the Johns family, are that Governor Terry McAuliffe has chosen to name the beautiful Ninth Street Office Building after Barbara,” said **Joan Johns Cobbs**, Barbara Johns’ sister who joined her in the walkout. “It is, indeed, an honor and we are eternally grateful for your thoughtfulness and generosity.”

The classically-styled building originally was constructed as the Hotel Richmond, one of the city’s first high-rise buildings and an epicenter for Richmond and Virginia politics during the first half of the 20th century. The hotel was the brainchild of Adeline Detroit (“Addie”) Atkinson, a self-made businesswoman who secured financing from banking magnate J.P. Morgan to fund the project. The 1904 eight-story building was expanded in 1910-1911 to add an 11-story wing and a two-story addition to the original building. The extension was designed by John Kevan Peebles (1866-1934), the architect responsible for the 1906 renovations that added the temple side wings to the Thomas Jefferson-designed Virginia Capitol. The hotel housed the winning campaigns of five governors between 1945 and 1965 and was the home of Richmond’s first radio station, WRVA, for three decades. The Commonwealth purchased the building at 202 N. 9th Street in 1966 and converted it into office space, renaming it the Ninth Street Office Building.

The Department of General Services worked with Department of Historic Resources on a major renovation of the building that restored the grand hotel lobby, including its marble flooring and monumental staircase, ornate plaster details and trim, and stained glass skylight. The rehabilitation also reopened the original second-floor balconies and restored the historic two-story ninth-floor ballroom, featuring refurbished ornate plaster details and trim. The project was completed in 2016 and earned LEED Gold certification. In 2009, the building was listed in the Virginia Landmark Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

“The renovation of this iconic building is the perfect marriage of historic preservation and modern sustainability principles,” said **Chris Beschler, Director of the Department of General Services (DGS)**. “The Barbara Johns Building is the latest in a series of Capitol Square building rehabilitations where we were able to provide a contemporary space for the government to conduct business while also honoring the structure’s place in Virginia’s history.”

McAuliffe and the Johns family unveiled the plaque that will hang in the building, and a portrait of Johns will adorn the grand lobby.

Johns was a student at the all-black Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville when she became frustrated by its overcrowding and poor conditions and by the school board’s refusal to build a new high school comparable to the county’s school for white students. On April 23,

1951, the high school junior led more than 450 of her classmates as they walked out of the school and marched to the courthouse and to the homes of local school officials to protest unequal conditions. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sent civil rights lawyers Oliver Hill and Spotswood Robinson to Prince Edward County to meet with the students, and they agreed to file a lawsuit, *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, in federal court on their behalf. (Dorothy E. Davis, daughter of a local farmer, was the first name on the list of students wishing to file suit, hence the case bears her name instead of Johns'.) The Supreme Court later combined its ruling in the Davis case with four other similar cases in what became the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision that declared segregation in the nation's public schools unconstitutional. Rather than obey a court order to integrate its schools, Prince Edward County closed all public schools from 1959 until 1964.

Fearing reprisals against their daughter for her part in the student strike, Johns' parents sent her to Montgomery, Alabama, where her uncle Vernon was serving as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. She lived with her uncle's family while she completed high school and then studied at Spelman College in Atlanta for two years. In 1954, she married William Rowland Powell, a minister. She moved with him to Philadelphia, where she raised a family of five children and worked for 24 years as a school librarian. She did not participate in the civil rights movement in Philadelphia or elsewhere and never spoke about her contributions to the movement as a teenager. Her husband and children only became aware of her involvement late in her life, when she was contacted by someone interested in making a film about the Moton student strike.

Another building on Capitol Square is named in honor of Oliver Hill, and in 2008 the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial celebrating the contributions of Johns and other citizens of Prince Edward County was unveiled in a prominent location in Capitol Square, close to the Executive Mansion.

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